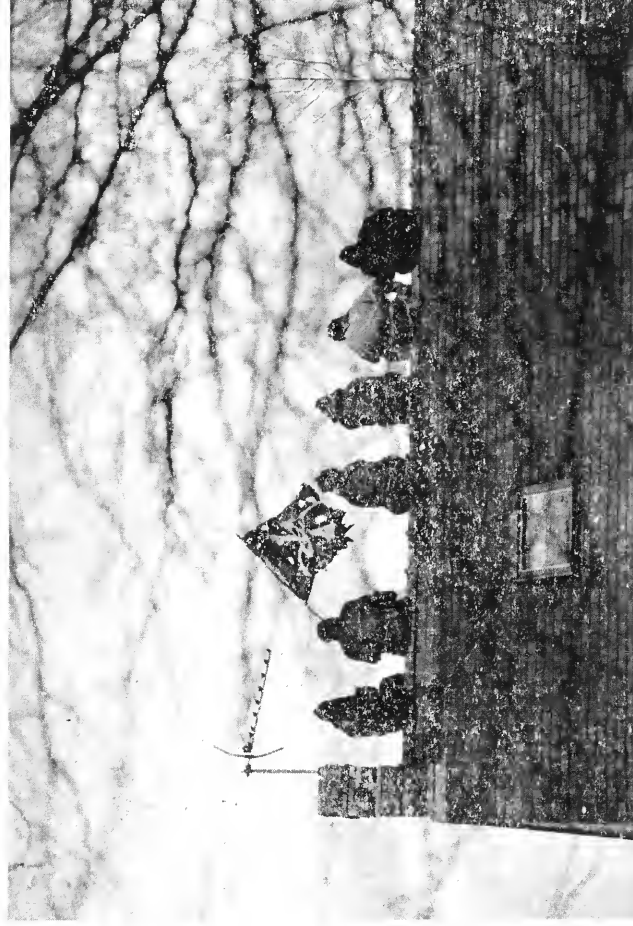


When they kick out your front door
How you gonna come?
With your hands on your head
Or on the trigger of your gun

You can crush us
You can bruise us
But you'll have to answer to
Whoa-oh, the guns of Brixton

Crowbar Chronicles

(some fragments of a life made by breaking and entering)



"chroniques du pied de biche: quelques éclats de vie par effraction", autumn 1998

original can be found on infokiosques.net

translated from french by borage press, summer 2013

critiques, love letters, etc can be sent to
borage@mailoo.org

other bases are built in parallel, in the hearts of cities or anchored in the mountains, I have also learned that long term battles could be taken on because there are obstinate people occupying consulates the world over, who fill the city with street battles, (Ungdomhousset) after which the anti-terrorist troops come to shoot up their house in a helicopter, the people announcing that they were going to take a house and 5,000 of them pushing the police lines until they pass through, getting arrested by the hundreds and starting over again each week for a year, succeeding step by step until a major social movement was created around an autonomously organized building, to rise up with a big part of the youth, and to be sheltered in the apartments of grannies in the district when the police were tracking them. I have the impression that we succeeded in finding strengths and practices of solidarity. I saw in some months that the Tolousians could take back a house in the evening, after having been evicted that morning, that the Parisians could make the police give up when they had come to evict, or that the Dijonaises could celebrate their ten years of occupation after having prevented yet again the sale of the land they squat. Yet all that evidently doesn't prevent our spaces and the struggles they are involved with being prime targets for the powers that be in the years to come.

I am hopelessly unable to get used to it. I will continue to be invaded by a crazy rage, a feeling of absurdity and of revolt, every time the police, the landlords, and the shitty building construction projects come to tear from us the rare zones of liberty that we manage to build in this world. I have in my memory all these moments so beautiful that sometimes the thought of lost spaces and collectives hits me in the heart and I just try not to be too nostalgic because it will only be created elsewhere and in other ways.

An electron of an intersquat (1995-2008 and more)

windmill, and they came... in late afternoon, 100 police running every which way and sealing off the neighborhood but this time we were ready for them and all the residents of this squatted street were posted on the roofs, ready to receive them.

Squatting gave me trust in the capacities of our networks to practice mutual aid on a large scale. When people arrive from all over because things are going bad at your house, demonstrate together against the shenanigans of a slumlord during a french intersquat, or to coordinate in different cities to simultaneously attack your landlord, when we meet up on actions or common struggles outside of squats, it works because we also regularly share living spaces, travels, parties, books, and lovers. I feel that even if one day we don't collect \$200 but go directly to jail there will be friends who will make noise, give support, keep the pressure on and prepare for our release, and it won't be so simple for them to isolate us, even when we're in a cage.

Squatting taught me that they can very well treat us like "young dreamers", and "utopians" and say things like- "It's all good when you're young! But you'll grow out of it" and "It's just a phase, you'll eventually be reasonable...". After a while, when they haven't managed to make you leave or to shatter your convictions, they take it more seriously. I know first off that a good part of the "revolutionaries" of the years after May '68 ended up leading a mainstream-life or in positions of power, and yet I chose to bet on the possibility of building forms of rebellions and of co-existing that will let us go on to be less naïve, more coherent, more tricky and harder to stop than those who came before us.

I know that the persistence of squats, even those that last, is always fragile, and is based on a continuity of strong relationships between people. It's a constant struggle. I think that squatting is a means, not an end, and it's precious that

After more than a decade of sharing collective life, I can no longer imagine living alone or in a couple. I wouldn't know what to do anymore without raves at breakfast and collective tooth brushings, friends hopping out of long-distance lorries arriving from Barcelona and knocking on the door without warning, the days where everyone works a little on their own projects, and those where fifteen of us gather to organize the free shop, put together a newspaper, prepare an action or dig a ditch. I feel like I just can't readjust anymore to certain standards of "normality". I cultivate this pleasure, a bit like the feeling of stomach-churning anxiety and disgust that comes over me when I walk into a megastore. I believe that squatting teaches you to adapt to many implausible situations, but also manages to induce in us incurable forms of hostility - and that's even better.

I learned a fluid sense of time, through eclectic days of painting and sawing and soil, of meetings, of writing and gasoline, of coded communications and heated dinnertime debates, of actions in the city and nighttime strolls. I know that there's a vast gulf between the reality of my house and that which many people think they would find behind our walls, with their media clichés of mattresses-filth-and-everything destroyed... I know that we refuse to be profitable within their economic nightmare, but that doesn't prevent us supposed "layabouts" and "parasites" from having days that overflow with activities, except that they're not measured in terms of profits and losses. We don't count in terms of 40 hours because there are many more in a week and we try to live each one of them with passion and without a boss.

Squatting showed me that the world is full of dumpsters, overflowing with raspberry doughnuts, tomatoes, and Little Debbie cakes. I learned to open my eyes in the streets and to find construction sites, factories, landfills full of material. I

learned to detect empty buildings dispersed throughout the city and to fantasize about lives on the inside.

Squatting taught me to want makeshift rooms full of garlands, where absurd comedy shows overlap with rave parties, evenings of telling hitchhiking stories, nights where you are the heroes, DIY karaoke, experimental cinema, political theater and Cassavetes films, puppet festivals, turbo folk and rock concerts, where the most important thing is the meetings and interactions between the people on the stage and us. I liked finding myself planting tomatoes with Argentinian musicians, staying in the living room drinking alcohol from far away places after closing up the basement and saying heartfelt goodbyes to people leaving for their next gig- friends unknown the day before.

I learned about collective workdays, where we can continue into the night, reading adventure novels of powder and fire, while putting a lime coating on a straw bale structure in a concrete hangar, or working like ants for hours under spotlights to remove beams from a ship's hull with a jackhammer, and then sleeping with fourteen others under a quilt watching a musical comedy or sitting on the steps of the house sipping hot chocolate to heal our sore muscles, and contemplating the flow of sound made by people driving off to work.

I learned there weren't many things more beautiful than finally choosing an unknown place and entering it for good, after having visited many others, to break through the strangeness of the cold walls, to make the yellowing objects and old flowered wallpaper your own, to have friendships emerge from sleepless nights and shared risks, pulling off unlikely jerryrigged successes, and victories against the police. This joy of suddenly bursting into existence was transmitted to offices, worksites, stores, highways, schools in session and it became possible to abruptly suspend their normal course and

from the inside and are attacked from the outside if we don't defend them. I learned that we can see our houses pass pointlessly into smoke in 20 something minutes, after having fought four years to keep it, burst into tears, put it all into perspective, pass the summer looking around amongst the rubble, and then rebuild on the ashes anyway because we've decided to stay even if we may lose everything again.

Squatting taught me diverse styles of waiting and provoking. I was woken up still drunk after a concert and two hours of sleep, by the riot police and their insults at the foot of my bed and with the entire front of the house smashed and shattered. I vowed to myself that I would try to never go through that again. I went to a breakfast in the street on an icy winter morning in January at 6am. Then we put cars and furniture across the street, along with some fire and music, surrounded by people leaving for work or bringing their children to daycare. We had been invited that morning because the residents wanted to choose their moment, their turf, and not depend on the date chosen by the police. And when the riot police finally decided to send groups of vans out of the police station, all the major intersections of the city were suddenly blocked by steel cables and flaming barricades, and the police blocked by tar and feathers. I slept some summer nights alone in a house full of rubble, hanging under the roof with a harness, sweating while waiting for the police, who evidently preferred to leave us alone and come several weeks later. I slept in a hangar next to a 200L barrel full of reinforced concrete, in which I was supposed to lock my arm if they came, but they never came and we won. And then one day I was woken up by a rainy august morning, after having slept a month and a half on the roofs, rehearsing eviction scenarios, turning the wait into a continuous offensive and creative party, thinking maybe they would never come and we could continue on as if in a dream. We savored the croissants and the new installation of a

action and organization already tested in daily life.

Squatting showed me that peace is a luxury reserved for certain people that benefit from a comfortable social position, who choose to shut up and close their eyes. I know that in our case, refusing to be silenced can necessitate learning how to make bulletproof doors, to sleep with one eye open, and to run with fire extinguishers or tire irons. I know this means being careful with what we say on the phone, preparing for raids at home, getting used to outwitting the police, psychopathic neighbors and neo nazi scum who shoot up your house or jump you in the street. Squatting has given me some nightmareish moments, extreme tension, panic, and blood in the stairwells. I also know that the creation of autonomous zones, with neither security guards nor cameras, makes for improbable alliances and the expression of "abnormalities" that would be otherwise repressed, and lets us organize to avoid a wide range of discriminations and violences, but that doesn't mean that we aren't ready to kick out the annoying people from social gatherings when they get to be too much or when you really just want to go to sleep. Squatting taught me to welcome and support unknown persons, but also to not be open to everyone, because it's not a "alternative hotel", and because there are situations where it is just not possible. That sometimes earned me the pleasure of being labeled, depending on people's tastes, as a "facist", "paranoiac", "bourgeois", or "bigot", sometimes by people who were actually homeless or seriously struggling, but more often by the generous citizens who live in comfortable apartments and are very happy to not be confronted by other people's shit, except in books or debates in cafes.

Squatting taught me that no matter how hard we might try, that we're not living in Disneyland but rather in a world hostile to our practices, where our autonomous enclaves quickly rot

petty problems, and to transform them for a time into living spaces.

I found a stunning poetry in transforming the histories and topographies of rusty places left out of time: to see the floor lamps from old slaughterhouses illuminating the vegan kitchen of an anticapitalist convergence, old bourgeois mansions sheltering radical feminists, an abandoned bikini factory hosting a rave party; contemplating lake Leman (in Geneva, Switzerland) from the roof of a twelve story bank, where people dance down below in the safes, or conspiring in a castle to create urban disorder, gathered around a table engraved with fox hunting scenes.

I learned how precious space could be, and to marvel at the possibilities in my house for giant parties of hide and go seek, an ice skating rink in the winter, or evenings of french fries and outdoor cinema; to have a storage room large enough to shelter an old boat, some wrecked cars, tons of failed inventions, and enough material to build and furnish several houses. I marveled a little less that the arrangement of the space, where so many objects, projects, and people accumulated, came to pose a daily challenge.

Squatting taught me to see the streets and houses as places for playing and building, that we could build a loft above the road, or meticulously reenact scenes from famous paintings, break up the concrete to plant trees and build a park, suspend a banquet table with pulleys five meters above the ground, pierce a house from top to bottom with a ship's mast and put a crow's nest at the top, put "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" on a ghetto blaster and spend the afternoon having food fights with rotten strawberries and mangoes, build a clay oven for pizza parties and create an open village in a district in the middle of a polluted industrial city, weld shoes with stainless steel heels, invent a system of wood stoves with

a double hearth, scaffolding and fuel cans, build a motor that runs on water or a pedal powered washing machine, shoot a zombie movie and attack the banks with ketchup, or prepare for the arrival of the police in "Maya the Bee" costumes (a children's cartoon that promotes sharing and friendship), with speakers blaring « I want to die on the stage » by Dalida.

Squatting proved to me that we can think big, that 100 people can methodically take over a hilltop geography institute one Mayday morning, overrun the town hall and the police headquarters for two days, and then be evicted without trial and still be euphoric to have experienced it. Sometimes we can also enter, without any serious scouting ahead or big group plans, into a factory visible to the entire district, full of doors and windows and far too porous to be properly barricaded, and manage to stay anyway.

I discovered that in a couple of years, I had accumulated a bundle of useful experiences, putting together newspapers and making pirate radio, climbing and welding, wielding spades and monkey wrenches, self defense and legal cases, accounting and street theatre, herbal healing and action first aid, cooking for a hundred people and making undercover investigations, action camps and strategic analyses, nomadic caravans or the organization of European convergences 2000 km from my home... I learned to participate in transforming collective fantasies into reality, to study the laws of money and of the state in order to break or circumvent them. I took heart in the fact that welfare or not, salary or not, I am no longer afraid to be "on the street", "precarious", "on the margins", or fixed with any other label of social marginality. I know that we've built networks that are self-supporting and that there will always be some plan to make a little cash when needed, as well as refuges and friends for starting up new lives. I also know that when we've overcome that fear, it's already a lot

way of the nearest on ramp.

Squatting changed my life as a tool of political resistance. It confirmed for me that to struggle, one must also create environments conducive to experimenting with other lifestyles, and to help them bubble to the surface elsewhere, that to go on the offensive, we need to have bases, where we can find each other, prepare, and relax. Squatting showed me how we can usefully bring together struggles for free transport or against borders, to support striking workers or against the construction of a prison, against the sterilization of our neighborhoods or for independent media, against technologies of control or for political hacking, that we can support revolts in Nigeria and work locally for the destruction of capitalism or patriarchy. Squatting showed me that throwing yourself into some of these struggles and not giving up can transform the city and make the authorities fold, leaving them spitting with rage, and offered me lots of time to try it out.

Squatting has given me faith in the power of groups, without having to wait for a mass movement. I saw that we could set off with thirty people and their toothbrushes to a privatized water corporation to get a contract, close a police headquarters by attacking it with cardboard swords, howl in front of a police station to get your friends out of custody, fling rubble and compost inside the mayor's office, and finally be successful because we're not alone, because we're ready to come back and we've learned from one another to stand up to them.

Squatting proved to me that when time speeds up, that when the factories, the universities, and the streets are blocked, we can apply the capacity to throw ourselves open hearted into the battle with cars and cooking pots, masks and words, mattresses and crowbars, chains and sound systems, and with relationships strong enough to transmit practices of

I learned in fits and bursts just how much this life, even if it's abnormal, remained easier for me because I was a white male, in good health, with a politically active family, and sufficiently undamaged by existence to have some confidence in my head and my body.

I saw that we have quickly enclosed ourselves in a "ghetto" with our buddies and our dress codes, to look at "normal people" with knowing smiles, to no longer leave the "alternative zoo", with its subgroups of "vegans", "black blocs", "anargeeks" and to recreate in some ways a culture as conservative as any other, despite the layers of anti-establishment varnish. Too often squatting is believing amongst yourselves that you are making the revolution while awaiting a mundane retirement in the countryside. Happily, I also discovered through squatting that the world was still full of radical factory workers, autonomous grannies, old self-taught activists, enraged people in their fifties, and curious neighbors abounding with knowledge and experience. I met people with whom it was possible to repair old vans, to strengthen the picket lines, to exchange pumpkin seeds or recipes for revolution, to learn how to sew or to fell trees, full of people ready to give coal fired stoves, a tractor, a photo developing lab, a testimony in court or the copies of the key to the house they just moved out of.

Squatting taught me that there will always be comrades to host you if you are down and out in an unknown city, and there are a hundred places that you can learn from and where you can offer to help out. I learned there will always be material and knowledge when you desperately need it, on another island in an archipelago of collectives and houses, spread throughout the cities and countryside, that can come to your house on the next convoy. I like how the houses where I live are departure platforms towards the four corners of the earth by

harder for them to make you give in or to put you back on the "straight and narrow".

Squatting taught me to live in the places where alternately 4, 20, or 50 people share day to day life, and where that number varies from one week to the next- then having 100 people from 20 countries who dance to disco hits after 3 days of marathon meetings, and to find ourselves again at 6 the next day, still stunned, in the same house.

Squatting taught me to live in groups of totally different people, among some people that went to bed at 6 o'clock in the morning when the others were waking up, some who spent their days around the table doodling tags, and others drafting texts; some who passed their time skimming the streets and bringing back objects of all sorts, while others passed their time with a broom in hand, filling up the trash cans; certain people who wanted to squat forever, while others were there for two months; some who swore their devotion to the garden, while others lived insomniac lives in digital code; some who hid at the other end of the house when the word "meeting" was thrown out, while others wanted them to last for hours; some who took to the streets at the slightest sign of social unrest, while others then grumbled about finding themselves left behind at breakfast; some who wanted to speak about interpersonal relationships and deconstruct power relations, while others went mute as soon as we weren't talking about hands-on things anymore; some who spent hours taking apart computer keyboards to paint the keys pink one by one, while others demolished the walls; some who only cooked mashed potatoes, while others couldn't go into the kitchen without launching into culinary escapades and serving the best falafels on earth at 3 o'clock in the morning, by which point three-quarters of the people had already given up and gone off to bed. I experienced how stimulating this diversity could be, but

also how well it worked when we managed to constitute ourselves as a group where political affinities, lifestyle choices, and shared responsibilities found coherent, stable forms.

I saw people who squat escape temporarily from their daily dose of alienation and apartments, from shitty jobs or studies where they were dying of boredom, from detention centers or jails, from damaging relationships or childhood trauma. I also saw how disorientating it was to live in conflict with the society that programmed us, and to refuse its norms, to freely choose one's schedule and activities. I saw that those who tried living in conflict with society learn that it's hard, that it doesn't always work out and there are too many friends and companions in struggle lost to burnout or depression, in a solitary descent back towards normality, or defeated by drugs. I also believe that there is always a risk of making radical bubbles, because afterwards it is really difficult to fall back into the world, after having known a little more solidarity, fever or sweetness.

I learned how much time it takes to live collectively, for maintaining' connections with your co-squatters and not just bumping into each other at meals, to support those who are not doing so well, and welcoming traveling friends. I know that an open place means planned activities and events, but also time for those who knock at the door without warning for visiting, painting the walls, bringing bike skeletons, jerrycans of frying oil or stacks of leaflets, to ask you for an interview for their sociology thesis, help for an undocumented friend or a squat going to trial, to drink a tea or propose to play a hip hop video, and answering the phone that never stops ringing with people asking random questions that send you running to the other end of the house. Often I like the excitement, but sometimes I feel like I'm drowning in it and it's spilling over too much into everything else, so I lock myself up to work at hours

when everyone sleeps, and sometimes I take the time to tear myself away from it all and leave to put out my thumb on the highway.

I observed to which point we hadn't learned to be autonomous; hadn't learned to organize ourselves without leaders, and to not count on the mothers and girlfriends to take care of the house. I noticed to what point we were still in the pattern where some people do all the thankless practical tasks and the others think and write for them. I saw that all that took time, the wanderings and the formal experiments, the confrontations and informal discussions, the charts and tasks and meetings without end... and often it's shit anyways. There are people who are overruled, there are arguments and power relationships, sometimes even more when we decide to work on it, to dissect them and throw them out of our lives. And little by little, we manage despite it all to smash some ideas of social determinism, to live by other reflexes, other forms of organization, and its beautiful.

I learned that it was possible to live pluralistic relationships, with groups and individuals, with different forms and different rules, in multiple cities and places, and not classify friendships-lovers-acquaintances into the limitations of pre-determined boxes. I love the possible diversity of intensities with my housemates from here or my friends from elsewhere, and feeling like each person became beautiful when we shared adventures and adversities.

I should make clear that our "protected" spaces were not sheltered from various forms of abuse or even from rape, and the decision to not close our eyes as is so common in other places, to try to react without the involvement of judges or police is one of the most complex and painful things we can face collectively. And if we don't try, there isn't much meaning left in all the rest.